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THE ART OF HENDRIK WILLEM MESDAG

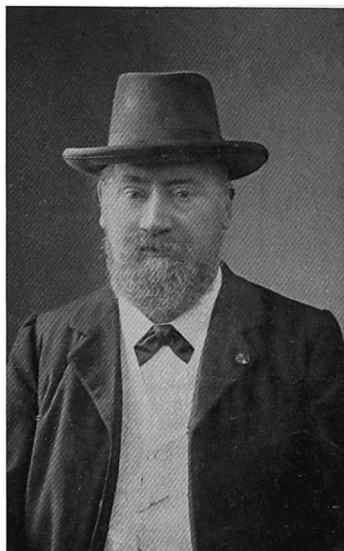
No realm of nature offers such possibilities, such inspiration, to the painter as the sea; yet few there be who have felt this inspiration with all its quickening force, or realized more than a beggarly measure of these wondrous possibilities.

Legion are the artists who have sought to depict the beauty and majesty, to catch and record the spirit, of the deep; and acres, nay counties, townships of canvas have been transformed into mimic bits of ocean. But the great marines, those that give anything like an adequate suggestion of the tremendous power latent or manifest, the awful sweep, the play of ripple and wave, the evanescent charm of color, the fascination, the weirdness, the mystery of the watery waste, would make but a sorry list.

"Boundless, endless, and sublime, the image of eternity, the throne of the Invisible," as Byron aptly phrases it, forever the same, forever changing, without features or seasons, the deep whispers or wails or thunders a revelation to those who can understand its message. And it speaks to the eye in terms no less unmistakable. In its every mood it is replete with the sublimest poetry—for the seer. And none but the seer should essay to depict its glory and its grandeur.

"Deep calleth unto deep," and if the poet hear naught but a noise, let him hold his peace, and neither speak nor write. And so of the painter, if he see naught but an unmeaning, unintelligible expanse of water, let him renounce the sea as a theme and select other subjects more within his comprehension. He may then produce acceptable art.

Marines to be worthy of the name should not be mere stretches



HENDRIK WILLEM MESDAG
From a Photograph



AT ANCHOR
By Hendrik Willem Mesdag

of blue or green or gray paint, smooth to suggest calm, or chopped or broken into sweeping lines to suggest action, with boats or driftwood disposed here or there for purposes of accent—these are the apologies for the ocean which we have offered us and which we are wont to accept by courtesy for seascapes. They should be chapters of that revelation which is ever present for the seer, messages in pictorial guise so rendered as not to travesty that most fascinating, most awe-inspiring of nature's phenomena—pictures to delight, to woo, to thrill, nay, even to repel, because the counterfeit is something more than a mere formal imitation of the real. Measured by

this canon of judgment, there are few *painters* of the sea, and one of these is Hendrik Willem Mesdag, a Nestor in the art of Holland.

Other artists have painted more witchery into their canvases, more tenseness and terror. A Mesdag has not the glint of color one finds in a Clays, or the awful meaning one reads in a Homer. On the contrary, many of his canvases are rather heavy in tone, and are works calculated to inspire quiet contemplation rather than to excite nervous tension. But he is a great marine-painter because he thoroughly knows his subject—he has sat by it, brooded over it, studied it in its every phase—and by straightforward methods, without trick of palette or adventitious accessories, has sought to make and has succeeded in making his canvases convey the same impression to the spectator that the ocean conveyed to him.

He is a realist of the sea. Whether he portray sunrise or storm on the water, fishing-boats beached on the sand or craft scudding before the breeze, fishermen auctioning off



EVENING EFFECT
By Hendrik Willem Mesdag

their catch on the shore or sailors struggling against the elements on the main, he indulges in no ideality of composition or color. Indeed, his pictures are apt to be dominated by a monotony of tone, but this is because as a Dutchman painting Dutch seascapes he has been true to a Dutch environment. Many of his best works would, to the average spectator, be comparatively tame in conception—he does not perpetrate wrecks, or abnormal billows, or lightnings, or fictitious accentuations of cloud masses. But this again is a tribute to his unyielding fidelity to fact.

He has been called a rude painter, which is but another way of saying that he is a true painter. He would scorn to be guilty of mere pretty painting. Finish, technique, are the least of his concerns. He has recognized the vital principle that a great subject demands great handling, and that excess of finish is often fatal to the impression to be conveyed. Some one has defined eloquence as earnestness—a phrase that stands as a living rebuke to those who indulge in studied accents and manufactured gestures. Mesdag is eloquent because he is earnest, he is full of his subject, he has something to say in his chosen medium, and he touches us, moves us, engrosses our attention, inspires us, because in his earnestness, in his devotion to truth, he is great enough to renounce what in his art would correspond to the studied modulations and gestures, the paltry expedients, of the elocutionist. It is not his function to declaim, but to impress.



AUCTIONING OFF THE CATCH
By Hendrik Willem Mesdag

In studying the masterpieces of Mesdag's genius—and the American public has recently been privileged to see a superb collection of twenty-seven of his best canvases, a rare treat in view of the fact that comparatively few of his more important works have found their way to this country—one should constantly bear in mind the characteristics of the country from which the pictures emanate. Otherwise



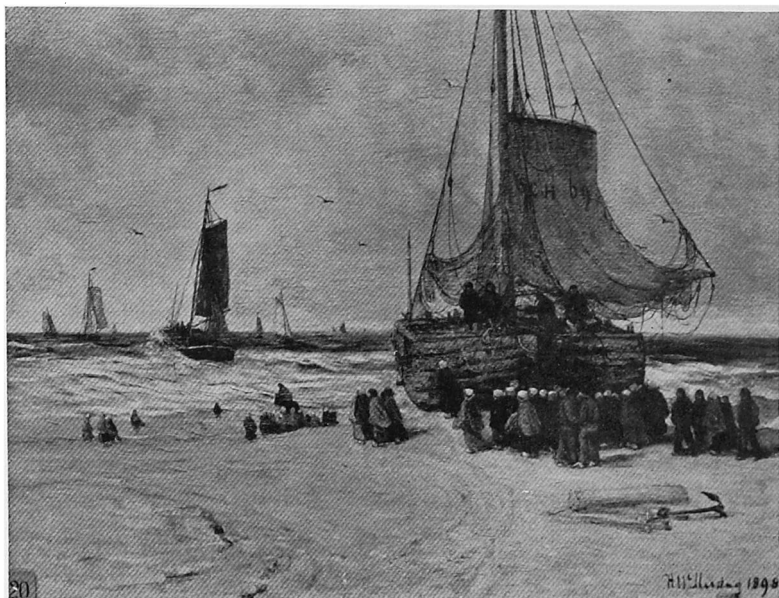
RETURN OF THE FLEET
By Hendrik Willem Mesdag

one would be apt to criticise as a fault what should be praised as an excellence. Local peculiarities should ever be observed in art.

The haze that hangs over southern waters would not fit the more rigorous skies of the north, and the clear, limpid, deep-toned water of our own seaboard would be a false note in any seascape painted on the coast of Holland. Mesdag has been criticised for the dominant yellowish tone of his water and for his gray, often sullen, skies. But if Mesdag had painted bright skies and clear water, his pictures would have been little more than studio products, and he would not be to-day one of the greatest of living marine-painters.

"Holland," said he, in a recent conversation, "is a gray country, often gloomy. The sentiment of Holland's atmosphere is melan-

choly. The sea has usually its saffron note. The only nature I know and am competent to paint is the nature of Holland, and should I undertake to paint clear or softly glowing skies, and limpid, deep-toned, sparkling water, imagination alone would have to be my mentor. I am too much of a realist to paint studio dreams, and whatever be the prevailing characteristics of my work, those charac-



AUCTIONING OFF THE CATCH
By Hendrik Willem Mesdag

teristics find their excuse and justification in a studious effort to depict facts, without distortion or idealization, as they are observed here in Holland."

All of Mesdag's great pictures have been produced in or near The Hague, a favorite sketching-ground being Scheveningen, a watering-place near the famous old city. The atmosphere and sky there are wholly unlike the atmosphere and sky of the opposite English coast, or even of the coast of Belgium, farther to the south. The waters apparently take their note of color from the sand, and the skies, shifting as they do into a myriad of evanescent effects, form in the main a unity of color scheme with the waters they arch. Mesdag has been content to accept what nature has furnished him near at hand, and he has wisely elected to follow the practice of his countrymen and



MOORED NEAR THE COAST
By Hendrik Willem Mesdag

paints simply, directly, and truthfully.

Apropos of the Dutch painters as a class, it may be said by way of parenthesis that no body of artists the world over are so thoroughly in accord as regards aims, ambitions, and methods. They are wholesome, simple to a fault, satisfied to portray their native meadows, their stretches of coast, their canal scenes, their quaint homelife, the customs and costumes of their own people. They are content to let others scour the world for new, out-of-the-way subjects. There is no body of artists in which the tender sentiment of home and country is so pronounced.

Mere brilliance, *chic*, the glamour of court, the gayeties and inanities of society, have had little or no charm for them. And for this reason, perhaps, if for no other, their works have been prized wherever a normal, wholesome sentiment is in the ascendant. It is for Mesdag a matter of pride and glory that, however much the themes of his works may differ from those of his fellow-artists—Israels, Blommers, Neuhuys, Bosboom, and the rest—he has kept in close touch with them in spirit and in loyalty to home.

It is worthy of note in this connection that Mesdag's art has developed under peculiarly happy circumstances. He was never "the struggling artist." Beginning life a banker—he is now seventy-one years old—he did not take up painting until he had reached an age when many of his artist contemporaries had attained distinction. With a competence of his own, and with the further good fortune of having married into a wealthy family, he was in position, when once he decided to adopt painting as a profession, to pursue his art studies

free from harassments and anxieties, and thus to devote in opulence and luxury the years of preliminary work which many another artist of note has had to go through in penury and want.

He lacked thus the stimulus of necessity, but he was led along on pleasant lines by sheer love of his art. Sales or lack of sales were of little concern, and "pot-boilers" were an unknown factor in his studio experience. One recalls, by way of contrast, the pitiable circumstances under which Millet produced the masterpieces for the possession of which collectors now vie with one another and for which they part with fortunes. Couture, it will be remembered, used to say of Millet that he was so poor he could not afford to paint folds in the clothes of his peasant subjects. May not personal lot have been a determining factor in shaping Millet's art, predisposing him at all times to emphasize what most people would like to see subordinated?

And so with Mesdag. He never felt the pinch of poverty, he could afford to bide his time and fatten while biding. His view of

the sea, of the sky, of the fisherfolk he painted, is that of a well-conditioned optimist, who sees things largely and responds generously to his environment. By sheer force of pleasant condition, therefore, the commercial element in Mesdag's art has been singularly wanting. He could afford to follow and did follow his art from sheer love of it. Many another artist under similar circumstances, lacking the stimulus of necessity, would have sunk into dilettantism, but Mesdag was too purposeful, too ambitious to excel, to allow sloth or social distrac-



WEIGHING ANCHOR
By Hendrik Willem Mesdag

tions seriously to intrude into his studio. Exempt from the temptation of commercialism, he has worked leisurely and with fine results.

On the other hand, he was not over-anxious to exhibit, and it is to be doubted if any artist of equal distinction has worked longer or more arduously before making public display of his work for the world's judgment. When finally he did submit his canvases to juries



FISHING-BOATS

By Hendrik Willem Mesdag

of selection for purposes of exhibition, it was to command their respect and admiration. The reputation which Mesdag coveted and was willing to work for came to him as a matter to be expected, and in no way satisfied his ambition or robbed him of his energy. Painting the sea, in a sense, became a sort of devotion, and his pictures bear manifest witness to that love of his specialized art that has dominated his life. Speaking of Mesdag, in connection with the American exhibition of his work, a critic, himself a painter, said recently:

"In the year 1880, I think it was, I was crowded through the Salon on a certain Sunday—having been foolish enough to go there on that overflow day—and caught sight of a marine, seeing it between the heads of the multitude, which fixed my attention because of its extraordinary strength and truthfulness, overbearing everything in the exhibition because of these qualities. The next day I discovered that many artists were talking about it. It was the first Mesdag I had ever seen, possibly the first example of the master ever exposed at the Salon.

"This picture is now in America. There is no date on the canvas, so I am pretty sure that it is the same one, and not a replica;



ARRIVAL OF THE FISHING-BOATS
By Hendrik Willem Mesdag



also that it has been hanging in the gallery at the home of the artist for years. No artist makes money with such works as this, as it is too imposing for domestic use and really only fit for a museum.

"The style of this painting was so different from that which we ordinarily saw at the salons that I was strangely impressed by the solidity of the oaken hulls of those two stolid fishing-boats, floating there in the lively sea, held by their two anchor cables, waiting for the tide to go out that they might be drawn up on the flat beach. Every one knows the custom at the Dutch fishing ports, which are not harbors at all, but merely flat beaches where the bulky and solidly built fishing-boats are grounded in all sorts of weather and hauled out by horses to the dry sands, there to await the next tide to float them for another trip.

"The waters of the sea along the coast of Holland are never clear and transparent when the wind blows up a lively sea, because

the sands are so light and easily washed up that they make a sort of greenish gray pea soup. It is not as pretty as some other water, but it has been so forcefully painted by Mesdag that we forget everything but the magnificent handling and the weight of the water. No other marine-painter whom I know can so give the effect of ponderousness of sea water; the others merely rendering the waves prettily. Sea water is ponderous, and that impression is the first one felt by the student of the moving waves. Mesdag gives this feeling superbly; it is one of his triumphs."

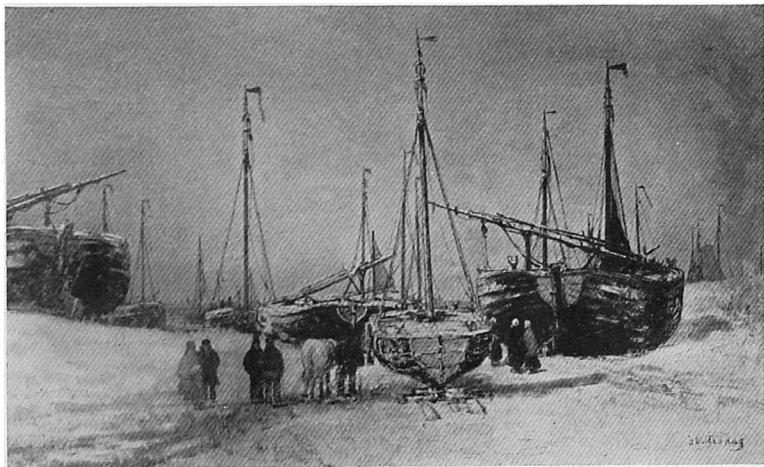
It is scarcely possible, even were it desirable, to dwell at length on the long list of Mesdag's superb works. For the most part his themes cover a narrow range, being some mood of sea and sky or some incident connected with the life of the fishermen on the Holland coast. His canvases are characterized by a fairly uniform degree of excellence, the disparity in quality so often noticeable in the work of other artists being less observable in his. Never having sought to center public attention upon himself, his art offers no surprises, no



WINTER OF 1890
By Hendrik Willem Mesdag

novelties in technique or coloring. Actual scenes, rendered with the precision of a seeker after truth—these have ever been his subjects. And the simplicity of his compositions, the breadth of his handling, the directness of his methods, have all been in keeping with his chosen themes.

The accompanying illustrations are thoroughly representative of his art. The reader will note the reiteration of the same sea, the same sky, the same people—the sea, the sky, the people of Holland—under manifold circumstances. Mark some of the titles of his can-



HAULED UP ON THE BEACH

By Hendrik Willem Mesdag

vases, "Shrimp Fishers," "The Scheur Near Rotterdam," "Misty Weather," "Auctioning off the Catch," "A Summer Evening at Scheveningen," "The Hurricane," "The Return of the Fleet," "The Arrival of the Fishing-Boats," "Launching the Life-Boat," "The Winter of 1891," "Weighing Anchor after Sunset," "Moored Near the Coast"—these all depict a single class of phenomena and present a single type of life.

It is no reflection on Mesdag, no insinuation of limited artistic ability, to say that he is a consummate master of a single kind of picture. He has learned to do one thing well, learned to do it as no other Dutchman, or even contemporary artist of any nationality, is able to do it. Many of his canvases are near enough alike in subject, composition, and treatment as almost to be replicas, and yet every canvas has its own peculiar charm and its own distinctive merits.

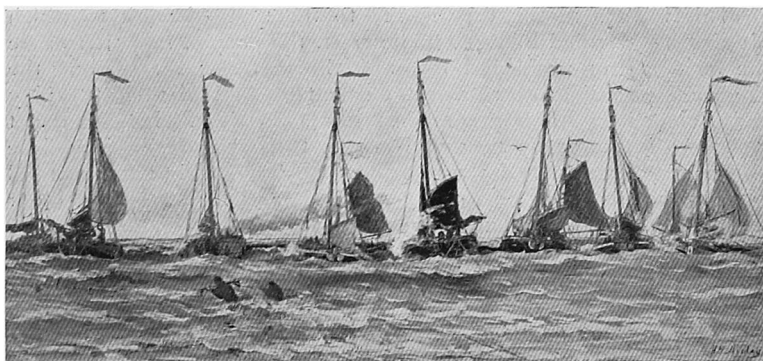
This inheres in the very nature to the type of work to which Mesdag has devoted himself. The craft, the people, he portrays are the incidental or accidental factors in his pictures; the sea and the sky are the abiding, ever-present elements. And of these the play and change between dawn and darkness is limitless. Mesdag is not a colorist, is not prone to give free rein to fancy, but he is a close observer and an acute interpreter, and he has caught and recorded more of the moods and meanings of sea and sky than any other Dutch artist. Indeed, he is one of the few masters of seascape.



THE SCHEUR NEAR ROTTERDAM
By Hendrik Willem Mesdag

A few words respecting the man himself should here be given. He was born in Groningen, in 1831, and not until his thirty-fifth year was he emancipated from the banking business, to which he had been reared. He then studied in his own way, and with an earnestness born of mature purpose. He began by painting on the window-panes the landscapes he saw through them, tracing them on transparent paper and transferring them to canvas. The sea finally claimed his attention and gave distinctive direction to his artistic efforts. He won a medal in Paris in 1870, and again in 1878. These and the other medals and honors that have been conferred upon him came as the merited recognition of genius. He is represented in many a European gallery, the French government having bought two of his pictures, one of which has found a place in the Luxembourg gallery.

What is more to the satisfaction of the master, his lot is a con-



THE ARRIVAL OF THE FISHING-BOATS
By Hendrik Willem Mesdag

spicuous contradiction of the old maxim that no man is a prophet in his own country. The Dutch people, with a simplicity and heartiness which is nothing less than beautiful, honor and revere their men of art and letters as they do the scions of royalty, and Mesdag—and the same is true of Israels and the other noted artists of the country—shares the love of the people with their "Queen Mother."

A beautiful trait in Mesdag's character, and one worthy of notice, is, that he has been the truest of friends and the most substantial of helpers to the struggling artists of his country. His great wealth he in a measure has regarded as a sort of trust, and he has spent it freely in the advancement of his country's art. When the Pulchri Studio Club, the leading art club of Holland, dedicated its new home last year, it selected Mesdag's birthday for the occasion and made him the guest of honor. A marble bust of Mesdag was presented to the club, the menus were decorated by Alma Tadema, and glowing tributes were paid to his genius.

Not content with producing pictures himself, he has ever been an ardent collector of works by other artists, and in his palace at The Hague are seven rooms filled with some of the world's masterpieces. This superb collection, together with the castle and its grounds, he has only recently given to the Dutch nation as a permanent gallery. In doing this he has but made public in fact what has been public in effect for many years, since the artist has been accustomed on stated days to throw open his home to whomsoever wished to come and enjoy his treasures.

This remarkable collection of pictures transferred to the government comprises twenty Daubignys, seven Rousseaus, three Millets, including the "Hagar" and "Ishmael," twelve Corots, five Duprès, five Troyons, five Vollons, three Decamps, three Montellis, three

Jacques, three Michels, ten by Diaz, two Delacroixs, one Jules, and two Emile Bretons, three Alma Tademas, three by Israels, including the famous "Alone in the World," which was at the World's Fair, three by Mather Maris, three by Jacob Maris, four Mauves, eight Roelofs, and pictures by Artz, Bosboom, and a great many more. The collection also includes much valuable rare Chinese and Japanese pottery and other Oriental art objects.

Speaking of the painters of Holland in general and of Mesdag in particular, Mrs. Charles P. Gruppe, who accompanied the collection referred to above to America, paid a pretty compliment to the art of the Netherlands. Said she—and her words may fittingly close this article:

"Holland's art is a reflection of the life of the people. It speaks of their patriotism, their disappointments, their triumphs; of their home life and the love of the family. Its painters, led by the immortal Rembrandt, bear a noble record. Their art comes direct from the heart. It is true and sincere. No artist can interest the world in his work until he has lived through what he strives to impart to others. The art that is to be great must be from the soul-life of the artist, and this is plainly shown in the works of those who spring from the soil of the Netherlands."

FREDERICK W. MORTON.



A CALM NIGHT

By Hendrik Willem Mesdag